

Q: Good afternoon. Today is Tuesday, September 17, 2019. My name is Elizabeth Lund and I am here at the Newton Free Library with Robert Alter. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. Robert, welcome.

A: Thank you very much, nice to be here.

Q: You have lived most of your life in the city of Newton, so let's begin our conversation by talking about your childhood. What was it like to grow up in the Garden City?

A: Well I grew up on a small street off Cabot Street right near Cabot Park called Westchester Road. And we moved there from Brighton in 1948 when I was three, and so I grew up on that street. It was just a wonderful neighborhood with many, many kids around and basically what we did from the time I got into kindergarten until I left that street is we played--and it was just sports mainly, and marbles. And we would go down to the Paramount Theater which was in Newton Corner at that time, where you could see a double show for 25 cents in those years. And there were yo-yo contests. My childhood there was just fun, it was a lot of fun.

We grew up right near Cabot Park and on a given Saturday morning you would see 20 of us, 20 kids out there, boys--I don't know what the girls were playing--but the boys were down there just playing football in the fall and baseball in the spring. We played basketball in my driveway. And right up the hill from our house was what we called Cabot Woods, which was Edmands Park, and at that time--it's not there anymore--there used to be a wonderful pond, small pond. But being small, it froze really early and well. And so basically I spent my youth, my winters, up there playing hockey and it was a lot of fun.

Q: So what were some of your fondest memories?

A: I think my fondest memory is waking up on some winter morning, and this would be early in the winter, not being sure that there was ice on the--skate-able ice--on the pond. We had a dog, an Irish terrier, Corky, and it was my job to walk him three times a day, so I would take him for a walk, walk up the pond, and look at the ice. And to see a fresh sheet of black ice in front of you, and then I would bring my hockey stick with me and I would be tapping on it. If it was solid, you could tell--we got very good at knowing what ice was like, so you could tell if it was solid. And then I can remember just getting so excited and just running home with Corky and putting on my shin pads and getting all ready for the day and then going up there and spending the entire day--my mother would make me some kind of sandwich--and spending the entire day playing hockey with my friends and not coming home until you couldn't see the puck anymore. It was just glorious. Glorious as the Springsteen thing is--glory days, those were the glory days.

I can remember skating on Edmand's Pond in the kind of late winter, maybe it was March. And it was warm enough so everything had melted around the circumference of the pond. So there was like a three foot gap of just water, but we skated 'cause there was ice in the middle. And to get off at the end of the day you just had to jump over this water to get off. We were just fanatics.

I can also remember coming home from the pond, this was a little later, and it was icy. I remember the hill that you had to come down for me to get home was icy. And so I decided, stupidly, to sit down at the top of the hill and come down on my fanny, just slide down on my fanny. Unfortunately, it was very icy and I started going faster and faster and there was a tree in front of me and I had to put out my hand to stop myself from hitting the tree, which created this--which I still have the scars--this gash in my hand. And I walked home from there with dogs following me, I can remember kind of just licking the blood from the snow. And then I ran upstairs, "Mom!" Went to the doctor and got some stitches. And then I used to tell people I got it playing hockey 'cause I didn't want to seem like an idiot.

Q: So it sounds like you had a lot of freedom and independence when you were young.

A: Yeah. My mother was the kind of mother who would just say, “Go out and play and I’ll see you at dinner.” In those days there weren’t the fears of parents that something bad would happen to their child. So you would just go out and run around and take your bike down to Newtonville and go all over--play all day and stay out. So yeah, there was a lot of independence, a lot of freedom. Me and my friend Rusty, he was my best friend, basically hung out together outside our houses all day. And we played, just played sports, sports, sports.

Q: You told me earlier about some of the sports stars who lived in Newton when you were a boy. Would you share that story again?

A: Yep. I think on Newtonville Avenue if I remember correctly, a Bruins star, Johnny Busick, lived. And I think he lived with some roommates, so I’m not sure if he owned the house. He may have just been renting the house. But I remember as boys we would stand outside his window, go over there and stand outside his house and just basically look up at his window hoping he would show up at the window. I remember that. We were real hero worshippers of hockey players in those days. Also Jimmy Piersall, who was a centerfielder for the Red Sox, he lived--I forget where, but we would also go up to his house and stand outside his house. He never came to the door either. And then there was an Olympic skater, figure skater, Tenley Albright. I don’t know if that name is familiar to you. And she lived on I think the south side of Newton because I can remember crossing Route 9 and we would--I think this happened once--we stood outside her house at the back door and she came to the back door and talked to use for a few minutes, which was great. We were kind of in love with her. And she later became a doctor, it seems. She’s a wonderful person.

Q: That’s a great memory. What was your experience with the Newton schools like?

A: It was great. I was a good performer in school. At that time--I went to Cabot School when Humpty Dumpty was on the wall and the steps leading up to the kindergarten. And I can

remember that the report cards in those years--it wouldn't be A, B, C, or anything. It would be rapid, normal and slow, which would be like way politically incorrect these days. That would not happen. But I can remember getting basically rapids in all my classes at Cabot School, except for the fourth grade. Mr. and Mrs. Gulesian were the teachers of the fourth grade. You got one or the other of them if you were going into the fourth grade, and nobody wanted either of them. But looking back they were probably very good teachers, actually. They were very strict. But I wonderful, wonderful teachers at Cabot School: Mr. Bee in sixth grade, Mrs. Palamino in third grade, Bresnahan in second grade. I can still remember their names interestingly. Then we went to Bigelow and my homeroom teacher was Mrs. Chase, she was the art teacher. And she had two favorite sayings, if I can remember them: "A word to the wise is sufficient." And that was like written above the board in these great letters, always there. And the other one was: "Variety is the spice of life." And there was a teacher there, Mrs. Hamilton, she was an older lady at that point, who was a great social studies teacher, and we really got into the Constitution with her, it was really a lot of fun.

Q: So it sounds like the Newton schools gave you a great preparation for life and for what would be coming into your experience as a college student.

A: I felt--well, we were always told and I can remember this at Cabot School, that Newton had one of the best school systems in the country. That was like a mantra that we were being told. So I always believed that, and I thought I got a great education in Newton, including up to the high school too. And then I got into Cornell early decision from Newton and that felt very good. I originally left Newton to go to Cornell to become a veterinarian, because they have a great veterinary school there. But I happened to arrive at Cornell during the '60s, and when the '60s fell on my head I just basically changed my course in life and became an English major and a Philosophy major. Yeah, Newton was a great education and I had basically good experiences in school. School was fun for me, except in Bigelow, Miss Hubbard's music class where you had to get up and sing something at the end of the term. And I had, and still don't have, any singing

voice, but you had the option of reciting a poem, so I recited “The Cremation of Sam McGee,” and that was my performance. So I got away with that.

Q: Sounds like it was a wonderful performance. So tell us a little bit about the time that you were away from Newton, because eventually you did come back to the city. So tell us about college.

A: Well as I said, in college, because of the ‘60s and the political stuff that was happening--and I was listening to a lot of Bob Dylan, a lot, still do--because of that I really changed. And I managed to stay academic enough so that I went from Cornell to Brandeis, graduate school, and I was on my way to becoming an English professor, but I couldn’t make it through graduate school. And my girlfriend at the time, who later and still is now my wife, we moved out of the area. We weren’t in Newton at that time, we were living in Waltham. We moved out of the area and went to the Berkshires and started living on communes. So I became very rural, worked for farmers, cut a lot of wood, chainsaw, the whole thing. Lived communally and did that for many years. We stayed in that area for about three or four years. Our daughter was born then.

Then we literally got into a VW microbus and--me, my wife, our daughter, and our dog--and we travelled around the country looking for a whole new place to live, but we didn’t really find anything. I think I’m just a New Englander by heart. I can’t live anywhere else. I don’t feel comfortable once I cross the Connecticut River basically. So we came back and lived outside of Fitchburg in a little town called Ashby, still hippies, still living communally. And our daughter, we sent her to what’s called a Waldorf school, Steiner--Rudolf Steiner school, which she liked, but in the eighth grade she said “Dad, mom, I don’t want to live out here anymore. I want to be normal. So I want to go to public school and do something.”

So I said, “Let’s move to Newton. That’s where I grew up, it’s a perfect place to live, it’s a wonderful place.” We moved back here, this was in 1986. We moved back here and she started going to Day Junior High School, because we lived in West Newton at the time. She actually had

for English Miss Fogg, who I had had for English and social studies at Bigelow. Miss Fogg was a total character. She would come into the social studies room, we'd all be sitting there, and she would yell out, "Battle stations!" And when she yelled out "Battle stations!" we all had to turn our desks in such a way that you couldn't see anyone else's paper, because that meant a test was being taken. So we took our tests and then we returned to our regular seating. Anyway, so my daughter, Greta, she had Miss Fogg. And then for the first couple of years we rented in West Newton and then we bought our house in Auburndale and have been living there ever since. My daughter is now in Wellesley, so it's really great to have her close by.

Q: So you told us about what it was like to grow up in Newton, and now you've mentioned a little bit about what it was like to be a parent in Newton. How did you feel about your daughter growing up in the same place that you had grown up?

A: Very proud, very proud. I love the fact that she went to--the name of it at that time was Newton North, when I was there it was Newton High. It had, in 1962 I think, it had split into Newton High and Newton South. But we were still called Newton High and we were very proud that we weren't Newton North. We were Newton High and then there was Newton South. By the time my daughter went to high school, it was Newton North and Newton South. She was in Riley House. I was in Bacon House, which was building three. I don't know if you know, at one time Newton High was three buildings on Walnut Street. In building one there was Adams House and Beals and Barry House. Building two was Riley and Palmer and building three was Bacon House, and I was in Bacon House. I was the president of Bacon House for one year. It's a little thing I'm a little proud of. It was my first and last entry into politics.

Q: So you are a natural storyteller and you mentioned earlier that you were on your way at one point to becoming an English professor. Did you ultimately become an English professor?

A: No, no. Well, sort of. When we went to this commune that we lived on, which was called Spring Hill, which was in Ashby, Massachusetts--Spring Hill was started by a bunch of psychologists who had moved out of the Cambridge/Boston area and were putting on these workshops out there for people to come out to this beautiful place on a hill, which is what Spring Hill was. This beautiful barn had been built and it was a workshop space, and they put on workshops called "Opening the Heart" workshops. And these were--people would come out and using a combination of psychological and spiritual kind of techniques, basically people would move through their stuff in a weekend that would take seven years to do in therapy. By moving there I was eventually invited to join the staff. So here am I, just an English teacher--unemployed English teacher at that point – and I'm on this staff where we're doing psychology, and from that I eventually became a psychologist. So since 197...8? Yeah, since 1978 I've been a therapist and am just retiring this year actually. And my practice has been in my home in Auburndale which is really great.

Q: So as you think about Newton as an adult and you think about the quality of life here, what do you value most about Newton?

A: Its liberality and the people who live here. They're very advanced thinkers, they're smart, they know what's going on. I value Newton's safety. Sometimes I'm in my house, I'm with my wife and we're watching TV or something, and the streets outside are just so quiet, and you just feel safe in Newton. I value its beauty. To this day I enjoy driving up and down Commonwealth Avenue, just the beauty of it. So from the Marriot now all the way to Newton Centre, just driving Comm. Ave, I just love it. Which reminds me when I say the Marriott, when I grew up, the Marriott wasn't there. What was there was Norumbega, which was a small amusement park. And there was one ride, the airplane, which was the most fun. There was also, as part of Norumbega, there was the Totem Pole, which was a place where people--acts would come out, performing acts like singers and big bands and stuff like that, and that's where high school prom--I think it

was our prom...yeah that's where our high school prom was held, the Totem Pole. So it was a really great thing to have in Newton, Norumbega.

Q: So you mentioned a lot of wonderful experiences that you've had here in the Garden City. Was there a negative or difficult memory?

A: The only bad memory I have--there may be more that I'm not thinking about--but the only one I can think of is in Mr. Rosenthal's science class at Bigelow. And I was sitting there and there was a storm outside, and the windows started rattling and I looked up in fright. And then he said something, I forget exactly what he said, but he said something that sort of made fun of me for being scared in that moment. But that's pretty minor. I mean other than that I really can't think of any negative experiences I had in Newton.

I just feel wonderful. I wrote a letter to Mayor--we call her Mayor Ruthanne--a couple months ago and basically saying we love the fact that you're mayor and you're doing a great job. And I told her this story that a friend of mine from Cornell, who eventually became a doctor, moved to Newton after medical school, and I knew it, and we hooked up again. And we were sitting there and I just asked him, "Well why, of all the places you could have lived after medical school, why did you choose Newton?" He said, "Because I remember the way you used to speak of it when we were at Cornell together." I hadn't realized I had, in those years even, spoken of it so well, but that's why he moved here.

Q: Well as someone who spent four years at Cornell and now lives in Newton, I can tell you that both places are wonderful, but the weather here in Newton is much, much better.

A: Much better. What do they say about it? In Ithaca it's either raining or it's going to rain.

Q: So in your work as a psychologist you probably are trying to help people deal with their own personal stories and find a sense of wholeness. Does living in Newton help you do those things? Does it support you in ways that then can help support your patients, maybe indirectly?

A: I'm not sure about that. I do like saying to clients who come, especially if they're from Newton, that I'm a local. I'm like a townie. And there's something in that that is good for the therapy and I'm not sure what it is but there's something in there that's good. Other than that I'm just glad I live in a nice house and there's parking outside and people can come and they see a nice house and a nice lawn and they come into the office and it's just nice. I'm very suburban by heart. That's really where my heart is. I'm a very suburban person.

Q: So are there other stories or memories that you would like to share?

A: Me and Rusty won the yo-yo contest at the Paramount Theater in Newton Corner in 1955, I think it was. Cabot School was a great place to go to elementary school, especially with the park right next door to it. And I went down to Cabot the other day and just saw it, and I think they're having an open house actually on Saturday, I think I may go. Once on our street there was--one of the hurricanes, I forget which one it was--Hurricane Donna, Hurricane Carol--that the pond up in Edmands Park overflowed, and the water came down the sluiceway, came down the hill and came down Westchester Road and entered our garage, in the driveway, and through the garage it got into our basement. So I can really remember that hurricane. Once there was...I forget the story, I forget what happened, but I remember there was some kind of escaped criminal who had gone up into the woods, up into Cabot Woods. and the police were on Westchester Road and we were being told, "Stay out of the woods, stay back, we're gonna go catch him," and then something happened, I forget what it was.

Q: So the yo-yo contest? Did you win that by knowing the most tricks or by--

A: Yeah. I forget the names of them now, but there was “walk the dog” of course. I actually forget the names--“around the world.” Everything that we did was basically just part of the fun of being a boy growing up in Newton. I think it was a little harder for the girls in our neighborhood, because they didn’t have--at that time--girls in sports weren’t doing the same thing that boys in sports were doing.

Q: So what would you like people in the future to know about your experience in Newton?

A: I can’t imagine a better place to grow up or to bring up children. It’s very close to Boston. If you’re the kind of person that likes to go into Boston you go in, but it’s far enough out that you feel there’s a quietness. Sometimes my wife and I will be driving home from a movie or a restaurant, driving Newton streets, basically at 8:30 or 9 o’clock the streets are quiet. Everybody’s in their house feeling good, doing whatever they’re doing. So it’s very quiet, serene, and a lovely place to bring up a family. It’s a great family place.

And the villages! I mean, I grew up in Newtonville, but not *really* Newtonville. Our zip code was at that time Newton 58, which is different than Newton 61, or Newton 60, or Newton 59. It’s a place where there’s no village, where we were, Westchester Road. But our basic village that we went to was Newtonville, that’s where we would take our bikes down to. So the whole village thing is a wonderful part of Newton also. And now we live in Auburndale and that’s got a new Starbucks and, you know.

Q: So now what are some of your favorite things to do in the city?

A: In Newton city?

Q: Anywhere in the city.

A: Okay. We live right across from the park in Auburndale, Lyons Park, and if you take that path through Lyons Park and just keep going, you're basically walking by the river, through the woods, and all the way to Waltham. You could go all the way to the watch factory. So my wife and I love taking walks there, it's wonderful. Other things we like...we like the West Newton Theater, although the older we get, the seats are getting a little hard to deal with there, but love going there. I still to this day, I say with some embarrassment, I just like driving around. Now that I'm almost retired it's just a great place to be for retirement, very, very quiet. I love coming to the library. I think it's a great library. When I grew up the main library was down in Newton Corner, very crowded, very old, and then they had branch libraries and the library that we would go to--my mother would take me there when I was very young--was the Newtonville library, which is now the senior center, and that was a lot of fun. That was where, when we were in high school, Annette Kasabian and myself sat on the steps--this was tenth grade--and we almost became girlfriend and boyfriend, but didn't quite make it. But we said that we would meet again on these steps ten years after we graduated high school, which didn't happen, but we did say that.

Q: You should write some of these stories down at some point, they would make a wonderful book!

A: Well I am a writer. So I've written--I've published four books, basically about psychology, but I think my writing days are through. I do. It's too labor intensive for me now. It's like trying to find the right words and put them in the right order and get the sentences right--which has been my labor for my whole life--I think there's a big part of me that just doesn't want to do that anymore. I'd rather be watching our shows on TV, or....Oh, another thing I like doing, but this has nothing to do with Newton, I love the Bruins so I watch the Bruins pretty much every game.

Q: What are some of the biggest changes you have seen in the city over the past few decades?

A: Not many actually. It's more crowded, the streets are more crowded. More cars. The stores keep changing, but that's fine. There's much more diversity here. When I went to Newton High, I think there was--that I knew of--I think there was a handful of African Americans and one--that I knew of--Asian person. His name was Chauncey Chu, who was a great kid. And now it's very, very, very different.

One of the great things that we do--at that time a girl, but now a woman--Annette Kasabian, she lives out in Acton, and every year around Christmastime she holds a party for our graduating class. Usually anywhere from 20 to 40 of us show up at her house and get together and talk and eat. And you realize--I realize--that even some of the people I knew well, some were just acquaintances, and some I didn't know at all, but there's something about Newton where I just realize I love all these people. I don't know what it was, I just love all these people. And I was saying to somebody the other day in support of her husband who grew up in Newton, that Newton just produces nice people, just nice people, and that's the thing I love the most about Newton, is how nice the people are.

Q: I would agree with that. Have you kept in touch with Rusty?

A: Yes, he lives in--I don't think his politics are my politics anymore, I think they're on the other side--but he lives in Scottsdale, Arizona now. Actually I just went over to Cabot and took pictures all around the new school and Humpty Dumpty on the bench there and sent those pictures to him and he really appreciated that. We email back and forth, yeah.

Q: So is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to mention?

A: I'm sure things will come to mind when I'm out of here and I'll say, "Oh damn, I should have said that or talked about that," but not really. Very fond memories sitting next to my mother in the car and she's driving up to the bakery in Newton Centre. In those days there were no seat

belts, so I can remember--what the seat belt was in those days was your mother putting her arm on your chest if the car came to a fast stop. And I just remember the motherliness of that. So if we were on Comm. Ave or going up Centre Street or something I remember her doing that, and that was very nice. The bakery was very nice too.

Q: So is there any advice you would give to people who are new to Newton and want to make this place their home?

A: The only advice, it sounds kind of silly, is just think of it as a great, great--you're very lucky, you're very lucky to be here. Of all the places in the world that people live, to live in Newton, Massachusetts is just, it's like the top of the top. It's a great, great place to live. For me, anyway--I'm sure other people would have other stories about it, but I had a great time and am still having a great time. And I love the fact that like in the old days--this is kind of patriarchal, but I'll say it anyway--in the old days the husband would go to the wife's village and bring her back to his village. So when I met my wife at Cornell, she comes from Queens, New York, I brought her back to Newton and I'm very proud of the fact that she now is a true Newtonite and loves Newton as I do. A little patriarchal but we'll let it stand, right?

Q: Anything else that you would like to add?

A: On my street--there were so many Jewish kids on Westchester Road, that I basically thought the whole world was Jewish. The only non-Jewish was one of the best athletes on the street, it was Bobby Hair, and he went to Our Lady's. In those days Our Lady's used to practice on Cabot Field, I can remember that. One thing about going down to the field is that on our side of the field, like the Cabot Street side--you didn't want to hang out on the other side because there were some tough kids from Newton Corner who would come there and if you lived on our side you didn't want to go and mix with them because it was a bit dangerous. Other than that, nothing.

Q: Well you've shared some beautiful memories and descriptions with us, and now it looks as though our time is just about up. So thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. We are really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

A: Thank you very much, I loved it.

END OF INTERVIEW